

THE NEW WARNER BROS. LIGHTWEIGHT CAMERA BLIMP

By Hal Mohr

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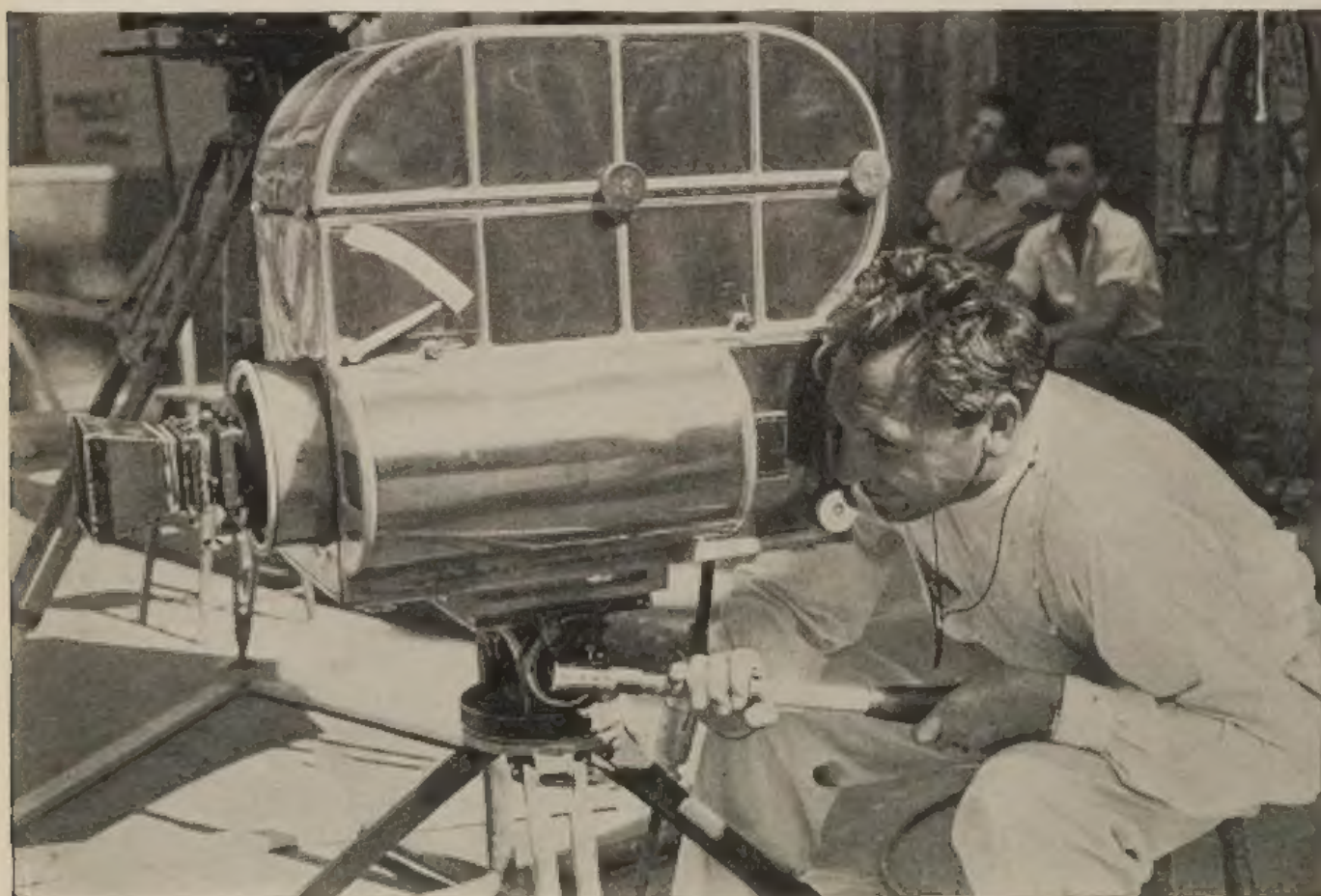
EVER since the success of the first Vitaphone films started the rush toward talking pictures, cinematographers have been learning all sorts of new things about their work and about the machinery they work with. One of the first things they learned was that their cameras, which they had always considered remarkably quiet, were far too noisy to suit their new colleague, the exacting 'Mike.' In other words, the pleasantly satisfying purr of a smooth-running Bell & Howell or Mitchell recorded even more strongly than the dialogue of the actors. Naturally, this couldn't be allowed, so both camera and cameraman were promptly locked up in a large, sound-proof chest, officially termed a camera booth. These booths were quite successful in insulating the noise, but they also insulated the cameraman from his colleagues on the set, and, as their ventilation was none of the best, they forced their unfortunate inmates to work under almost unbelievably bad conditions.

But this element of physical comfort was only one of the lesser evils. Any cinematographer will endure physical discomfort cheerfully enough, if he knows that he is getting worthwhile pictorial results. But the booths prevented his getting the best results. Once locked up in his booth, the cameraman was out of touch with his colleagues and with the action he was photographing. There could be no last-minute instructions from the director or from the director of cinematography, nor could he have any last-minute communication with them. But still more important were the restrictions imposed by the unwieldy size and

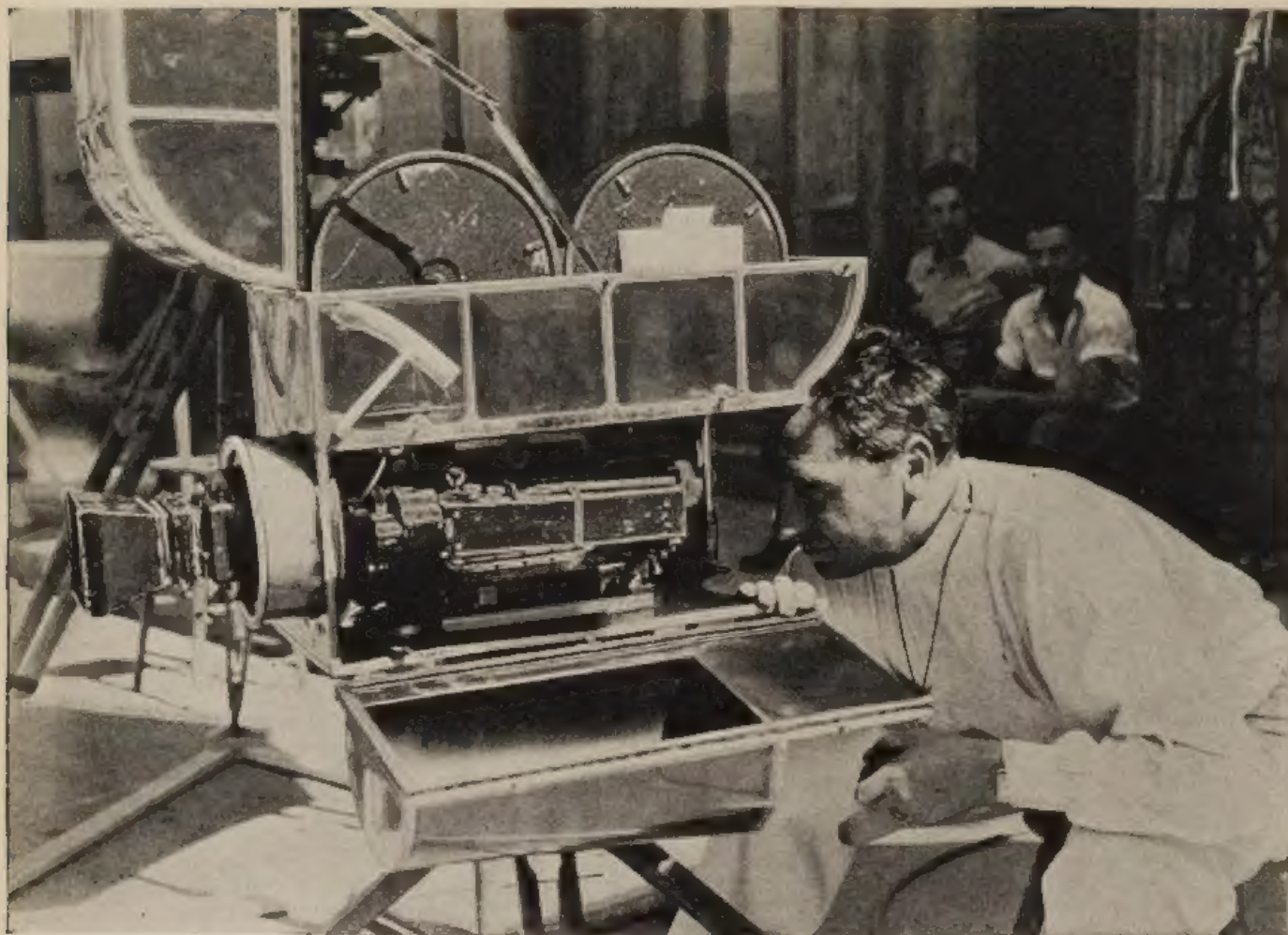
weight of the booths. They were so big and clumsy that moving them only a few inches necessitated real labor on the part of a large crew of 'grips': obviously they could not be used for the moving-camera shots which are so vital a part of modern screen technique; once in place, their half-ton or so of dead weight saw to it that they stayed so until a small army of men could noisily tug them somewhere else. Furthermore, they were so bulky that the three or four booths necessary to house the many cameras generally used in photographing Vitaphone scenes filled up practically all of the available floor space around the set, making the normal placing of the floor lighting units a difficult matter.

Such a state of affairs simply could not be allowed to last. Almost immediately the various interested agencies, in and out of the studios, started experimentation along two separate lines of endeavor, both of which sought to banish the booth.

The first of these was the creation of a truly silent camera, which would no longer need any sound-proof insulation whatsoever. This is proving a difficult task, as is attested by the fact that, while tremendous strides have been made, no camera silent enough to be used un-insulated under all circumstances, has yet been made. But while the task is difficult, it is not by any means impossible; the present lack of complete success only indicates that such a tremendous problem requires more time for complete solution. With so many expert engineers working on it, it is very probable that it will be fully solved within the present year. (Continued on page 22)



Hal Mohr using the new Warner Brothers' "Blimp"



Hal Mohr and New Warner Bros. Camera "Blimp"

Warner Camera Blimp

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The second line of attack has proven more immediately fruitful. It has consisted of efforts to reduce the size of the booth to such a radical degree that the camera alone remained covered, while completely mobile, and entirely accessible to the cameraman, who could once more return to the set as a visible person.

This line of research has brought forth many interesting designs, but almost without exception they have suffered from a common failing: they have not been adequately sound-proof. All of them have proven themselves vastly more mobile than the booths, but they have paid for it by some sacrifice of sound-impedance. Therefore, though a number of the studios have standardized on some form of lighter camera-cover, or "blimp," an equal number, more cautious, perhaps, reluctantly stuck to the unwieldy, but sound-proof, booths.

My own previous experience with experimental "blimps" having been anything but satisfactory, I naturally inclined toward the latter attitude. It was, therefore, profoundly interesting to me when recently I was called to the Warner Bros. Studio to direct the photography of several pictures, to find that my arrival coincided with their general adoption of a new and very remarkable "blimp" of their own design and construction. My experience with them during the making of these pictures proved that these blimps are not only as perfectly sound-proof as the best booths, but that they are, in almost every respect, as mobile and convenient to operate as an un-covered camera.

Constructionally, this newest "Blimp" is quite as radical as are its results. Instead of being, as most previous types have been, a structural replica of the big booths, it is comparatively small and light. It consists of a light, but rigid aluminum framework, surfaced inside and out with sheets of a special cellulose material imported from Germany. Between the two layers of this sheathing is a comparatively large dead-air space, which is responsible for the greater part of its sound-absorption. This construction would make it possible to have an almost transparent "Blimp" if it were necessary, but normally they are

painted on the inside with a flat, black paint, to eliminate undesirable reflections.

In form these new "Blimps" conform rather closely to the outlines of the cameras within them. The entire top, and the larger parts of both the left-hand side and rear walls are hinged so that they swing very wide open, leaving the cinematographer unusually ample access to his camera when that is necessary. The camera is placed in this "Blimp" exactly as though it were to be used normally with the exception that the matte-box, etc., at the front is removed and mounted outside of the "Blimp." The usual Vitaphone synchronous motor is used. The camera is mounted on a fully-insulated base within the "Blimp," and held in place by the customary screw, which is operated from outside of the "Blimp." The "Blimp" itself is secured to the tripod by means of a sub-base, which fits upon the regular head of a Mitchell tripod. As the complete "Blimp" only weighs thirty-seven pounds, it can be used satisfactorily on any ordinary tripod, but for the sake of safety, the Warner engineers have evolved a special rolling tripod for it, which is somewhat lighter in construction than the commercial models used with the heavier "Blimps" used elsewhere.

In use, this new "Blimp" gives the cinematographer almost as complete freedom as he would have with the camera alone. When opened, he has complete access to every important part and adjustment of his camera; when closed, he finds the camera adequately sound-proofed, but still with the more important units visible, and the controls accessible. The "Blimp" is so balanced that it may easily be panned and tilted in any way desired. The focus may be adjusted by means of levers working on twin dials on either side of the case. The finder, which remains in its normal position at the side of the camera, is always visible through a large, hooded opening at the rear, conveniently close to the rear of the finder. The opening through which the picture is photographed is, of course, fitted with a plate of optic glass. But here is one of the most unique features of the "Blimp": this opening, instead of being merely a fixed window in the front of the "Blimp," is a comparatively small sheet of glass fitted into a sliding collar, which, in turn,

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Warner's Camera Blimp

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is fitted into a metal sleeve integral with the "Blimp's" frame. This port-hole is therefore adjustable, and quickly and completely removable. On it may be mounted the various filters, gauzes, mattes, etc., normally used in silent cinematography, and these may be adjusted with relation to the lens exactly as in former days: the customary sunshades, etc., may be mounted in front of them, leaving this whole vital assembly on the outside of the "Blimp," and instantly accessible. For use with extreme short-focus lenses, the port-hole assembly may be reversed, bringing the glass, gauzes, etc., quite as close to the lens as is possible with the ordinary matte-box assembly, and leaving a clear field for the lens' wide angle.

Since the complete "Blimp" is so light, and since it gives such freedom to the cinematographer and sound-man alike, it is easy to see why the Warner-First National technical staffs are so enthusiastic about them, and knowing that enthusiasm, the industry as a whole can count it a stroke of great good fortune that these new devices are to be made generally available.

Shooting an Eclipse

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point of making a much wider use of movie facilities in our scientific work."

The scientific expedition was made possible by the co-operation of the American Society of Cinematographers, Fox Film studio, Hearst-Fox Movietone, and Daniel B. Clark, who provided the automobile that carried the party over 2000 miles of California and Nevada highways, twice across the high Sierras and through 29 counties of the state.

Professional Amateurs

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at the Pathe Studio. Ever since I've had the *Filmo* I've taken it on location trips with me, and sometimes to the studio, as well. That way, I've been able to preserve a lot of those enjoyable moments between scenes, which otherwise would become just pleasant memories. And we've all had so much fun doing it! In those long waits between scenes, we've made little scenes of our own, and whenever I showed up with the camera it's been, "Well, Mary, what do you want me to do today?" and, "Hello, Miss Cameraman. Have you anything for me in this scene?"

"But when I started this last picture, *Holiday*, I found it so interesting, and everyone so willing to help, that I grew bolder, and brought the camera out nearly every day, and set it up beside the studio cameras. At first I thought I could only get the scenes that I didn't play in, but one of the assistant cameramen volunteered to be my assistant, too. So after that I'd led him shoot the scenes I played in, just as I shot the others. In one sequence—a big Cathedral wedding-scene, I stayed in place just as long as I could, shooting myself, and only passed the *Filmo* over to him in time to run madly over to where I was supposed to make a dignified entrance!

"And everyone has been so kind and helpful to me! The cameramen have helped me with my exposures, and compositions. The sound men have been amazingly considerate, too. They tell me it's lucky that my *Filmo* is so quiet, for it's enabled me to get much closer shots than I'd dared to hope for. And—well, everyone in the company has been lovely about it. Just the other day I was getting ready to shoot a scene, and suddenly, to my amazement, one of the carpenters came up and began to set a 'gobo' beside me, to shield my lens from the glare of some lights. A few minutes later, the assistant director saw that the 'extras' were blocking my field of view as they entered and left the set, so he came over and rearranged them so that I, too, could get my picture. But these are only a few of the kind things everyone did for me all through the picture—things entirely apart from their regular work, and which made things so much pleasanter and happier for me. And they did it all with a wonderful, friendly spirit that made me proud to be a fellow-worker of such fine people."

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Tendencies in the Cinema

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non-sequential logic. It has accepted the compound as fiscal salvation and as palpable technology. But the compound is an art, technology informed by philosophy. The philosophy, critical viewpoint, is absent. Russia alone is completely the land of the philosophic cinema: therefore we may hope for much from its compoundings. If the technology of the Russian film keeps up with its philosophy, a very great compound cinema will result.

The famous Art-director, Boris Bilinsky, recently exhibited a series of sketches for costumes and sets made for a dozen French films, among which were *Casanova*, *Scheherazade*, *Monte-Cristo*, *The White Devil*, and *Tarakanova*, at the Galerie de France, in Paris.